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STRENGTHENING OF THE COORDINATION OF HUMANITARIAN AND DISASTER RELIEF ASSISTANCE OF THE UNITED NATIONS, INCLUDING SPECIAL ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE
REPORT OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES: QUESTIONS RELATING TO REFUGEES AND DISPLACED PERSONS AND HUMANITARIAN QUESTIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS QUESTIONS

SECURITY COUNCIL
Fifty-fourth year

Letter dated 29 January 1999 from the Permanent Representative of Eritrea to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to transmit an eyewitness report issued on 29 January 1999 by Amnesty International concerning the gross violation of human rights of Eritreans and Ethiopians of Eritrean origin by the Ethiopian Government (see annex). I cannot emphasize enough the cruelty of the mass deportations by the regime in Ethiopia, to which the international community has the responsibility to respond.

I should be grateful if you would circulate the present letter and its annex as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda items 20, 105 and 110, and of the Security Council.

(Signed) Haile MENKERIOS
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

Annex

REPORT ISSUED ON 29 JANUARY 1999 BY AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Ethiopia/Eritrea: Amnesty International witnesses cruelty of mass deportations

"I was picked up at night, thrown into prison, not allowed time to pack. I asked what my crime was. 'You're an Eritrean,' they said."

Amnesty International representatives returning from investigations in Ethiopia and Eritrea warned today that forced mass deportation now threatens everyone of Eritrean origin in Ethiopia, causing untold suffering to thousands of families every week.

Last week in Eritrea, Amnesty International's representatives witnessed the arrival of some 1,280 women, men and children of Eritrean origin who had been rounded up and deported by the Ethiopian authorities. Most of those Amnesty International spoke to either had Ethiopian passports, or had been born or spent their entire working lives there, and considered themselves Ethiopians.

Ethiopia's policy of deporting people of Eritrean origin after war between the two countries broke out in May 1998 has now developed into a systematic, country-wide operation to arrest and deport anyone of full or part Eritrean descent. Fifty-two thousand Eritreans have been arbitrarily deported from Ethiopia over the last seven months, 6,300 so far in January 1999.

"Women, some of them pregnant, children, the elderly -- even hospital patients -- are now being arrested and detained in the middle of the night," Amnesty International's representatives said.

"People of all ages, from babies to pensioners, are imprisoned in harsh conditions for several days before being forced to board buses under armed guard with only one piece of luggage each -- if that -- and being dumped at the border. They arrive hungry and exhausted, and often ill, after the three-day journey."

Families have been split up, the male head usually deported first, and his wife, parents and children weeks or months later. The many Ethiopians married to Eritreans are forbidden to leave and forced to watch helplessly while their spouse and children are deported.

Deportees have had to abandon their homes, possessions, businesses and other property with no guarantee of ever recovering them. Individuals who have protested have been threatened or beaten. The deportees were arbitrarily stripped of their Ethiopian citizenship without any warning, legal process or right of appeal.

Ethiopia's Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has said that the deportees posed a threat to national security and that they had forfeited their Ethiopian citizenship by voting in Eritrea's independence referendum in 1993.

Amnesty International representatives visited Ethiopia in October 1998 and Eritrea in January 1999 to examine allegations from both sides of human rights abuses arising from the May 1998 conflict. They met government officials and interviewed returnees from both countries.

At least 22,000 Ethiopians have returned to Ethiopia from Eritrea since May, most after losing their jobs and being rendered destitute as a result of the hostilities, and some in fear of reprisals. No evidence was found to support Ethiopia's allegations that 40,000 of its citizens have been seriously ill-treated and forcibly deported from Eritrea since May 1998.

Enquiries were also made into the Eritrean bombing of a school in Mekelle, northern Ethiopia, in June 1998. The Eritrean government admitted the resulting deaths of 48 civilians, including women and children, were a "mistake", but has established no independent investigation into the bombings. An Ethiopian plane bombed and killed one person at the airport in Asmara, the Eritrean capital, the same day.

Amnesty International is reiterating its appeal to the Ethiopian government to put an immediate stop to the deportations and ill-treatment of deportees, and arbitrary detentions of thousands of other Eritreans, including 38 students in Blattein military camp. They contravene Ethiopia's laws and Constitution, as well as the international human rights treaties Ethiopia has ratified.

In the event of further fighting, the human rights organization urges both sides to respect the Geneva Conventions, which Eritrea should immediately ratify. They should also ensure that civilians do not become targets or victims of the fighting, and that no Eritreans in Ethiopia, or Ethiopians in Eritrea, should suffer reprisal because of their national origin.

"The international community -- particularly government representatives stationed in Ethiopia -- must break their silence and make a joint stand against the deportations and other human rights violations," Amnesty International said.

Background

The deportations of Eritreans from Ethiopia began on 12 June, one month after war broke out in May 1998 between the former close allies who fought together as guerrilla movements to overthrow the Dergue government in Ethiopia in 1991, when Eritrea became a separate independent state. What began as a border conflict led to some ground fighting, then air attacks by both sides, and occasional artillery firing along the border.

Mediation by the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the United Nations, the United States and other governments is continuing to avert a near-imminent all-out war which would be devastating for both sides. Each side has re-armed and has mobilized massive forces along the border, and the fighting has already displaced up to a quarter-million people.

Ethiopia is state party to International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Geneva Conventions.